

Rival Claims to Palestine Date From Biblical Times

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The war in the Middle East is an outgrowth of conflicting claims that go back to Biblical days.

When Abraham was 90 years old, according to the Bible, the Lord appeared to him and said: "I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Genesis 17:8).

Abraham had a son named Isaac, to whom the Jews trace their origin. According to the Bible, God confirmed his "everlasting covenant" with Isaac and through his son, Jacob, with every succeeding generation of Jews.

However, Abraham had another son named Ishmael, from whom the Arabs claim their descent. According to the Koran, God promised Ishmael that he and his seed would be dominant.

Today, the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael are fighting for possession of the land of Canaan, which the Arabs call by its Roman name, Palestine, and the Jews call Israel.

Dispute Between Cousins

This tangled, emotion-laden dispute can perhaps best be understood as a rivalry between peoples who once regarded themselves as close cousins, if not as brothers.

According to one historian, there was a time, not so long ago, when there was "no such thing as an Arab-Jewish problem, when relationships between the two peoples were as normal as those between any cousins."

Islam, the religion of the Arabs, drew heavily on the Judaic and Christian faiths. In sharp contrast to the prevailing polytheism of his day, Mohammed insisted on a single omnipotent, omnipresent God. The line of prophetic descent leading to Mohammed included not only Abraham and Ishmael but Adam, Noah, Moses and David.

The destruction of the Biblical states of Israel and Judah by Assyria and Babylonia, in the 8th to 6th centuries B. C., led to the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews through the Old World.

Jewish communities were re-established in Jerusalem under the Persians in the 5th century B. C. The Maccabees established a new Jewish state in 141 B. C., but yielded to Roman rule.

Palestine came under Moslem rule in the 7th century.

Beginnings of Zionism

The Jewish nationalist movement known as Zionism had its origins in the 19th century in Eastern Europe, where Jews lived under the weight of periodic Russian pogroms. These

Jews felt that the Diaspora was at the base of their miseries.

They believed that by returning to Palestine, and regaining contact with the soil that gave birth to Jewish religiosity, culture and nationhood, they could regain their sense of dignity.

In 1903, Britain offered the Zionists an autonomous territory in Uganda, then a British territory, but the Zionists turned it down, insisting on Palestine.

As early as the eighteenth century, under Zionist auspices, Jewish settlers began returning to Palestine, which had come under Ottoman rule in the 16th century.

The Zionists saw their real chance to regain the Palestine when the Holy Land became theater of fighting. Under a British-French agreement of 1916, Britain was to take control of Palestine and Iraq after the war while France took Lebanon and Syria.

Long before the war ended, the Zionists began bringing pressure on Britain to restore Palestine as a Jewish homeland.

Balfour Declaration

The result of these pressures was the 1917 Balfour Declaration, named after the Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, in which Britain said she would "view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a National Home for the Jewish People and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this objective."

In an attempt to assuage the Arabs, the declaration said it was "clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine."

Under British civil rule, established in 1920 under a mandate of the League of Nations, Arab extremist attacks on Jews were often matched by Jewish terrorism.

Tension rose so high that a British Royal Commission in 1937 declared the mandate unworkable and recommended the partition of Palestine into an Arab state, comprising two-thirds of the territory, a Jewish state. This formula formed the basis of the partition plan adopted ten years later by the United Nations General Assembly. The Arabs refused to recognize the partition.

Israel Wins Independence

As soon as the British mandate ended and the state of Israel was proclaimed in May, 1948, the neighboring Arab states invaded Israel. After several abortive truces, the war ended Jan. 7, 1949.

Under armistice agreements, Israel added 2,380 square miles, mostly in the Negev and West Galilee, to the 5,760 square miles assigned to the Jewish state by the United Nations partition.

The neighboring Arab countries received more than 700,000

Arab refugees driven from their homes in Palestine. Most of them found refuge in Jordan.

Truce Units Established

The armistice agreements established four mixed armistice commissions, each with representatives of the countries involved and a United Nations chairman. However, the commissions were unable to keep the peace.

Palestinian refugees often stole across the borders at night to take fruit and vegetables from the fields that had once

been their own. More serious raids followed. Israel embarked on a policy of reprisals.

An intensification of raids on both sides resulted in the Israeli invasion of Sinai on Oct. 29, 1956.

The invasion was supported by Britain and France, which hoped to use the opportunity to reoccupy the Suez Canal, nationalized by Egypt earlier in 1956.

The Israeli attack, was a success. In seven days the Israelis routing 35,000 Egyptian troops and killing 3,000 of them.

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